FROM THE ASHES OF THE PHOENIX:
LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY
COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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For five years during the Vietnam War, as part of its counterinsurgency strategy, the United States executed an attack, codenamed the Phoenix Program, against the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). The VCI were the estimated 100,000 clandestine operatives living within South Vietnamese society that supported the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units in the field. They performed recruiting, financing, political indoctrination, intelligence collection, and logistical support tasks. It was not until 1967 that a concerted effort was made to neutralize this component of the insurgency. As the program developed over time, it was extremely effective and severely hindered the insurgency's ability to support operations against the regime. Today, the United States is faced with another insurgency, conducted by militant Islamic fundamentalist organizations that seek the overthrow of friendly regimes, the reestablishment of an Islamic caliphate, and the eventual overthrow of Western civilization.

This paper argues that as part of its counterinsurgency effort against this threat, the United States must neutralize the militant Islamic infrastructure (MI2) that enables the insurgency's global attacks. The paper provides an overview of the Phoenix Program, outlines the nature of the current insurgent threat, and identifies critical strategic lessons from the Vietnam experience that should be applied to a modern day Phoenix Program.

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FROM THE ASHES OF THE PHOENIX: LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS

The Vietnam War was the most controversial conflict in American history; it wreaked havoc on society, colored a generation's perception of its government, and devastated the military. Its specter casts a shadow over every American political debate about the use of force abroad. As the first defeat in U.S. military history, most soldiers would rather forget it completely; when studied at all, it is usually in a negative sense – what to avoid, how not to operate, etc. Disgusted with the inherently messy nature of counterinsurgency, the Army turned its attention after the war to the kind of wars it prefers to fight – conventional, symmetric conflict.[1]

While a number of civilian scholars examined the war, the Army focused on how to defeat the Soviets on the plains of Europe.[2] While academic historians often deride the military for trying to re-fight the last war, in this instance no one can accuse the Army of that sin. Through its doctrine, scenarios at its officer education system and national training centers, and almost every aspect of force development, the Army has remained singularly focused on fighting a conventional conflict. The result was spectacular performance in both conventional wars with Iraq. Today, however, the Army finds itself in the middle of a major counterinsurgency – this time on a global scale against insurgent threats posed by militant Islamic fundamentalists. The current counterinsurgency involves major combat operations, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, major advisory and training missions such as in the Philippines, Georgia, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa, and numerous smaller missions around the world.

Unfortunately, such is the baggage that still attends the Vietnam War three decades after Saigon's fall that senior military and political leaders only speak the words "Vietnam" in sentences along the lines of "Iraq is not another Vietnam…." Yet the Vietnam conflict constitutes the longest and most intensive counterinsurgency in American history. For nearly two decades, the United States provided a full spectrum of security assistance to South Vietnam in its battle against the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese sponsors. The brightest minds in the government developed strategies and concepts to defeat the communist insurgency in Southeast Asia as part of an overall strategy of containment. Today, the America contends with a similar challenge. It faces active insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, both being fought within the context of a world-wide insurgency led by militant Islamic fundamentalists. As the United States seeks ways to defeat these new insurgencies, it is imprudent to ignore the lessons from the counterinsurgency of the Vietnam War.

This paper examines one major aspect of that conflict, the attack on the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), the Phoenix Program. It will provide the historical context and an overview of the Phoenix Program, describe the contemporary insurgency threat, and analyze strategic lessons for contemporary counterinsurgency operations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Significant debate persists on the strategic rationale for America's involvement in Vietnam. However, even those who argue the war represented a necessary element of national strategy agree that South Vietnam was not a vital American interest in and of itself; its importance lay as a symbol of American commitment.[3]

American involvement in Vietnam spanned more than two decades, from support for France's attempts to reinstate its colonial government in the aftermath of World War II, through an advisory period that began in the late 1950s, to the introduction of conventional forces in 1965, "Vietnamization" beginning in 1968, withdrawal of conventional U.S. military forces in 1973, and the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.[4] When the U.S. implemented the Phoenix Program in 1967, twelve years had already passed from the first official U.S. military death in the war.[5] After years of providing advisors and equipment to the South Vietnamese government, the United States introduced major American ground forces in early 1965 to prevent the imminent collapse of South Vietnam.[6] By 1967, two years of conventional force operations and the commitment of nearly 450,000 troops had prevented a collapse, but had failed to defeat the insurgency.[7]

As early as 1966, President Lyndon Johnson met with senior U.S. and South Vietnamese civilian and military officials in Honolulu to discuss placing an increased emphasis on winning the political war in South Vietnam, since it seemed unlikely that conventional military operations alone could produce victory.[8] In the president's view, "the other war," the war for the support of the South Vietnamese population, was as important as the military struggle with North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and VC main force units.[9] While the civilian agencies and some military units had put considerable effort into pacification and development programs, such efforts remained largely uncoordinated and ineffective.

An initial attempt to unify the civilian effort under the Office of Civil Operations began in November 1966. Headed by a deputy ambassador, it was a short-lived failure. Consequently, in May 1967, President Johnson decided to unify all military and civilian pacification operations under an organization called Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), a component of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).[10]

OVERVIEW OF THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

MACV Directive 381-41, 9 July 1967, officially inaugurated the "Phoenix Program" as the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on VC Infrastructure (VCI), with the short title of "ICEX."[11] By late 1967, MACV had replaced the innocuous name "ICEX" with "Phoenix," a translation of the South Vietnamese name for the program, "Phung Hoang."[12] Phoenix did not initiate the attack on the VCI. Instead, it centralized existing efforts and raised the level of attacks on the infrastructure to the mission of destroying NVA and VC main forces. Phoenix embodied an understanding that insurgency principally represents a political struggle for primacy between competing political ideas. The insurgency first seeks legitimacy, and then supremacy for its political agenda in both the eyes of the populace and the outside world, while the counterinsurgency struggles to deny such legitimacy.

An assessment published by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in early 1969 aptly summarized the dynamic:

> The struggle … is in essence a struggle for political domination…The primary issue is control over people…our adversaries have generally employed armed force…primarily as a political abrasive intended to cow the population into submission, collapse all political structures … and erode the appetite for struggle …the ultimate measure of success or failure will not be relative casualties … but—instead—whose political writ runs … over the population of South Vietnam.[13]

To pursue their struggle for political supremacy, the North Vietnamese established an unconventional warfare force within South Vietnam. The nucleus of this force was a clandestine element of three thousand political and five thousand armed military cadre, who had remained in the south after the July 1954 Geneva settlement.[14] The intent of these agents was to mobilize support for the Communists in the elections that were to occur in accordance with the Geneva Accords. Once it was clear that the South Vietnamese would not hold such elections, they used this infrastructure to conduct an unconventional war against the Diem government.[15]

The VC insurgency, instituted, directed, and supported by the North Vietnamese, had two major components. The first consisted of armed VC guerrillas, augmented by regular NVA soldiers, who had infiltrated into South Vietnam. The guerrillas and NVA units were the main focus of American counterinsurgency operations, initially conducted by the South Vietnamese and their U.S. advisors, and later by the American military forces after the introduction of conventional units in 1965.

The second component included VC personnel and organizations which performed support roles, such as recruiting, political indoctrination, psychological operations, intelligence collection, and logistical support. American intelligence labeled the latter component the VCI.

The CIA assumed initial responsibility for attacking this component of the insurgency for a variety of reasons. First, anti-VCI operations were a logical adjunct to State Department-run pacification and civil support programs. A CIA report noted:

> In addition to the "positive" task of providing the rural population with security and tangible benefits sufficient to induce it to identify its fortunes with those of the GVN, the pacification program also involves the "negative" task of identifying and eradicating the Communist politico-military control apparatus known as the Viet Cong Infrastructure (or VCI).[16]

Second, the targeted personnel were primarily civilians; consequently, as noted in MACV Directive 381-41, "[t]he elimination of the VCI is fundamentally a Vietnamese responsibility employing essentially police type techniques and special resources."[17]

Consequently, the primary South Vietnamese organizations prosecuting operations against the VCI were intelligence organizations, the police, and paramilitary organizations such as the Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation, the District and Provincial Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers, the Special Police, the Field Police, and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units. The CIA was largely responsible for the creation of these units and organizations.[18] To some extent the task fell to the CIA by default. CIA leaders recognized the importance of destroying the enemy's infrastructure; senior military leaders, particularly during General William Westmoreland's tenure as MACV Commander, considered the VCI a peripheral issue.[19]

First initiated in July 1967, Phoenix aimed at providing U.S. advisory assistance to ongoing operations that targeted the enemy's infrastructure at the corps, province, and district levels.[20] It became a more coordinated effort when the South Vietnamese created the Phung Hoang program in December 1967. But it took the Tet and May Offensives in 1968 to highlight the critical role of the infrastructure in facilitating the enemy's main force operations.[21] As a result, South Vietnam's President issued a decree in July 1968, which fully committed the South Vietnamese to establishment of structures at every level of government to coordinate operations against the enemy's infrastructure.[22]

The Phoenix Program established committees and coordination centers at the national, corps, province, and district level. In addition, it directed the participation of key representatives from civil government, police, security services, and military organizations operating in the area.[23] At province level and above, these committees served largely to provide guidance and policy direction.[24] They also established quotas at the province and district levels for efforts to neutralize the enemy's infrastructure.[25] The national level Phoenix committee established

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evidentiary rules and judicial procedures, specified categories and priorities of a variety of targets, and defined incarceration periods tied to target category. [26]

At province and district level, Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers (PIOCC/DIOCC) served as the foci of all-source intelligence fusion on VCI-related reports and operational planning to execute operations against VCI.[27] The centers provided a mechanism to consolidate information from the numerous organizations operating on the battlefield, deconflict intelligence collection activities, and plan and coordinate operations. The United States primarily provided military advisors at the PIOCC/DIOCC level. Advisory staffs at higher levels tended to have greater interagency representation. At the province level, the U.S. advisor was tasked to:

> …form and chair a Province PHOENIX Committee composed of all principal members of the US official community capable of contributing effectively to the attack on the VCI…[and] work in close conjunction with the counterpart GVN coordinating committee to bring together an effective GVN/US team to optimize intelligence support and coordination of the dual effort against VC armed units and the VCI.[28]

At the District level, which was the primary operational planning and execution element, the U.S. advisor was responsible for:

> - Providing timely military intelligence support to tactical units and security forces.
>
> - Achieving rapid, first-level collation, evaluation, and dissemination of VCI intelligence.
>
> - Generating police, military, or special exploitation operations to disrupt, harass, capture, eliminate, or neutralize local VCI.[29]

The understanding that the principal objective was to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the population led inevitably to the realization that large-scale combat operations were counter-productive to pacification goals.[30] According to MACV Directive 381-41, the intent of Phoenix was to attack the VCI with a "'rifle shot' rather than a shotgun approach to the central target – key political leaders, command/control elements and activists in the VCI."[31] Heavy-handed operations, such as random cordon and searches, large-scale and lengthy detentions of innocent civilians, and excessive use of firepower had a negative effect on the civilian population. Government forces appeared inept and unable to meet the security and stability needs of the people – in other words they were on occasion the main threat to these goals. Unfocused, large-scale operations usually failed to kill or destroy the infrastructure, which controlled large sections of the population or critical support functions; rather, they were more

likely to net easily replaceable guerrilla fighters. The Phoenix approach also acknowledged that capturing VCI was more important than killing them.[32] Captured VCI were the prime source of information to identify future targets. Focused, police-like operations were much more likely to achieve this end than large-scale military ones.

Over time, the Phoenix program generated negative press coverage, accusations that it was a U.S. government sponsored-assassination program, and eventually a series of Congressional hearings. Consequently, MACV issued a directive that reiterated that it had based the anti-VCI campaign on South Vietnamese law, that the program was in compliance with the laws of land warfare, and that U.S. personnel had the responsibility to report breaches of the law.[33] That directive described Phoenix operational activities as:

> Operations…against the VCI…include: the collection of intelligence identifying these members; inducing them to abandon their allegiance to the VC and rally to the government; capturing or arresting them in order to bring them before province security committees or military courts for lawful sentencing; and as a final resort, the use of reasonable force should they resist capture or arrest where failure to use such force would result in the escape of the suspected VCI member or would result in threat of serious bodily harm to a member or members of the capturing or arresting party. [34]

Clearly, the intent of these operations was not indiscriminate killing and assassination; unfortunately, decentralized operations in an uncertain, ambiguous environment did lead to abuses.[35]

Officially, Phoenix operations continued until December 1972, although certain aspects continued until the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.[36] Like the Vietnam War that spawned it, the Phoenix Program was, and continues to be, a subject of controversy. To some, it was an assassination program, carried out against innocents, and symbolic of the moral bankruptcy of the entire war.[37] For others, it was a benign coordination mechanism that offered "the best hope for victory" in the Vietnam War.[38] Like any controversial issue, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. Regardless, Phoenix was the U.S. government's largest and most systematic effort to destroy the insurgency's political and support infrastructure – a critical element in a counterinsurgency campaign. Ultimately, the entire counterinsurgency in Vietnam was a failure, for a variety of reasons; clearly, one critical factor was that the VC had established a large and effective support cadre throughout South Vietnam before a coordinated effort was undertaken to eradicate it.[39] While indications are that Phoenix achieved considerable success in damaging that infrastructure, it was too little and too late to change the war's overall course.[40]

TODAY'S INSURGENT THREAT

Vietnam was a classic example of a mass-oriented insurgency. [41] The VC sought to discredit the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government in the eyes of the population through a protracted campaign of violence, while offering its own parallel political structure as a viable alternative to the 'illegitimate' government. [42] The 'battlefield' in a mass-oriented insurgency is the population – both the government and the insurgents fight for the support of the people.

As one author has suggested, both sides in this type of conflict have two tools in the struggle for control and support of the populace: "…popular perceptions of legitimacy and a credible power to coerce."[43] He goes on the note that the target of coercion, the populace, defines the threat's credibility, not the employer of the threat.[44] Consequently, conventional military power does not necessarily equate to credible coercive power. The conventional force may possess state of the art weaponry and overwhelming destructive power. Nevertheless, if the populace believes it will not or cannot be used against them, it has limited coercive value - particularly if the insurgent is able to punish noncompliant members of the populace and reward supporters.

FM 3-05.201 states that mass-oriented "[i]nsurgents have a well-developed ideology and choose their objectives only after careful analysis. Highly organized, they mobilize forces for a direct military and political challenge to the government using propaganda and guerrilla action."[45] The militant Islamic movement, present throughout the Middle East and in many parts of Africa and Asia, is a mass-oriented insurgency that seeks to supplant existing regimes with its own religious-based political ideology. As espoused by Al Qaeda, its ideology seeks reestablishment of an Islamic caliphate, removal of secular or "apostate" regimes, and removal of Western influence from the region.[46]

The militant Islamic insurgency is inchoate; while nearly global in nature, it does not yet appear to be truly unified in a single insurgent movement, despite Al Qaeda's attempts to serve as a coalescing force. Rather, the current insurgency appears to be a loosely coordinated effort of multiple groups, in varying levels of development, with nearly coincident goals and objectives, who have not yet joined into a single unified front. Consequently, jihadist groups like Zarqawi's in Iraq may not respond directly to instructions from the Al Qaeda leadership, but they share similar anti-Western, fundamentalist Islamic goals and are likely receiving support from similar sources.

Army doctrine establishes three general phases of development for an insurgent movement. It acknowledges that not every insurgency passes through each phase and that

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success is not contingent upon linear progression through the three phases. The first phase is the latent or incipient phase. In it, the insurgent movement focuses on recruiting, organizing, and training key membership, as well as establishing inroads into legitimate organizations to facilitate support of its objectives. It establishes the clandestine cellular support structure that facilitates intelligence collection and operational actions, and infiltrates its supporters into critical positions within governmental and civilian organizations.[47] The insurgency uses only selected violence during this phase in order to avoid provoking an effective regime response before the insurgency can respond.[48]

Once the insurgency has established its support infrastructure, it violently challenges the government. In phase II, guerrilla warfare, the insurgent movement takes active measures to challenge the regime's legitimacy. This can include attacks, assassinations, sabotage, or subversive activities (such as information operations).[49] In a rural-based insurgency, the insurgents are often able to operate from relatively secure base camps. In an urban-based insurgency, the members rely on the anonymity of urban areas to conceal their presence within the population.

In phase III, mobile warfare or war of movement, guerrilla forces transition to conventional warfare and directly confront government security forces. If properly timed, the government has been weakened sufficiently to succumb to assault by insurgent forces. This phase takes on the character of a civil war, in which the insurgents may control and administer significant portions of terrain by force of arms.[50]

Due to its widespread nature, assessment of the developmental progress of the Islamic insurgency is dynamic and regionally dependent. For example, in Iraq, the Islamic insurgency (in loose coordination with other nationalist-based insurgent elements) is in phase II, conducting guerrilla warfare. In Saudi Arabia, recent attacks suggest the insurgency is transitioning from phase I to phase II. In Egypt, government control has kept the insurgency in phase I, with Islamic dissident groups conducting propaganda operations, but rarely able to use violence. Based on the global nature of attacks initiated by militant Islamic organizations, the insurgency has already spent significant time and effort in phase I; as a result it has developed insurgent infrastructure capable of supporting operations in selected locations throughout the world.

As in the early years of the VC insurgency, regime counterinsurgency operations have focused on the violent component of the Islamic insurgency. [51] Spectacular attacks such as 9/11, the embassy bombings in Africa, the attack on the *USS Cole*, and the Madrid subway bombings, or the now-routine daily guerrilla warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan focus attention on the paramilitary element of the insurgency. As with the VC, the armed Islamic elements cannot

survive without a support infrastructure. Investigation of the high profile attacks indicates the presence of a widespread support network for intelligence collection, material support, finance and movement of insurgents.[52] However, these 'direct support' cells represent only one component of the overall militant Islamic infrastructure (MI^2).

The MI^2 also has a 'general support' component. It includes religious/political infrastructure consisting of Islamic scholars and mullahs who 'justify' violent actions by their interpretation of the Koran and Islamic law, as well as their use of the pulpit to recruit, solicit funds, and propagate the insurgency's propaganda.[53] This component is critical to providing the insurgents with the stamp of religious legitimacy for their actions. Recently, the lead Islamic insurgent in Iraq issued an audiotape castigating religious leaders for flagging allegiance to the insurgents, and thus underlined how seriously the insurgents view the importance of this support.[54]

The general support component of the MI^2 includes Islamic non-governmental organizations that solicit money on behalf of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, and fund fundamentalist madrassas and mosques throughout the world. Such religious institutions serve as recruiting centers and platforms to spread propaganda themes. This component also includes media organizations and web sites that broadcast the insurgents' PSYOP products and further their information campaign objectives.[55] The MI^2 directs, supports, and sustains the execution of violence against the regime; it constitutes the insurgency's center of gravity.

There are several disincentives to attacking this source of power; however, it must be neutralized to defeat the insurgency. The infrastructure component is harder to find than the armed elements and is less susceptible to U.S. technology-focused intelligence collection methods. Rules of engagement are less clear-cut, as the targets frequently are noncombatants in the sense that they do not personally wield the tools of violence. Consequently, the risk of negative media attention and adverse public reaction is high. Moreover, infrastructure targets are likely to fall into interagency 'seams.' While armed elements in Iraq or Afghanistan are clearly a military responsibility, responsibility for infrastructure targets, particularly those outside a designated combat zone, can cut across multiple agency or department boundaries. Despite these obstacles, attacking the infrastructure represents a critical component of the overall counterinsurgency efforts to defeat the militant Islamic insurgency. Consequently, lessons drawn from the Phoenix Program can offer important guidelines.

CONTEMPORARY INFRASTRUCTURE ATTACK

Five years of operational experience against the VCI yielded significant lessons at the tactical, operational and strategic level. The focus of the remainder of this paper is on those strategic lessons most relevant to an attack against the MI^2. One can classify those lessons into three major categories: command and control, operations, and legal/ethical issues.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Identification of Objectives

Defining objectives for an organization is a basic function of command. During the Vietnam War, the belated identification of the infrastructure as a center of gravity allowed the VC an insurmountable time advantage. This has two implications for the current struggle. First and foremost, U.S. strategic leadership must acknowledge the nature of this war. A militant Islamic insurgency, not 'terrorism' is the enemy. [56] Second, the United States must wage a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign that includes neutralization of the insurgency's infrastructure as one critical component of an overall campaign. By focusing solely on the operational element of the insurgency the United States risks paying too little attention to the "other war" and thus, repeating the mistakes of Vietnam.

Unity of Command

One of the most significant successes of the Phoenix program lay in the establishment unity of command among disparate civilian agencies and military organizations.[57] The Phoenix Program, led by a civilian deputy in CORDs under the Commander, MACV, essentially created an interagency command element to unite civilian and military lines of command. [58] The PIOCCs and DIOCCs enabled interagency cooperation and coordination at the operational and tactical level; unfortunately, there was no mechanism to enforce cooperation. Consequently, while senior leaders synchronized objectives at the highest level, organizations might still be working at cross-purposes at lower levels. This was particularly true in the intelligence arena, where organizational rivalries often hindered intelligence sharing, as agencies treated their best sources and critical pieces of intelligence in a proprietary manner. [59] Timely and accurate intelligence is essential for counterinsurgency forces to execute focused operations, which limit negative effects on the population. Compartmented intelligence processes impede development of a comprehensive picture of the insurgent's infrastructure – a picture that one

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can only 'assemble'' by compiling the various 'pieces' collected by all the participants in the counterinsurgency effort.

The U.S. government must unify today's counterinsurgency operation at every level. The U.S. should establish an interagency counterinsurgency task force, empowered to establish objectives, set priorities, and direct operations. The decision to appoint a single director for the nation's intelligence agencies represents a useful first step in establishing unity of the intelligence effort; however, the United States must wield all the elements of national power in a coordinated fashion. Currently, the National Security Council is the only integrating point for the departments; it does not possess the design or staff to plan and execute the detailed application of national power required to defeat a global insurgency.

Unity of command should extend down to the tactical level. Fora based on cooperation, such as the PIOCCs and DIOCCS in Vietnam, are largely personality dependent – they only work well when the participants 'mesh;' they fail when personalities clash. Organizational structures, empowered to direct interagency counterinsurgency tasks, must exist at every level. While this might seem an usurpation of departmental responsibilities, the global counterinsurgency campaign needs singularly focused direction and supervision by an organization empowered by the President to direct departmental cooperation at all level.

Metrics

Evaluating operational effectiveness is another basic function of command. Commanders often use measures of effectiveness (MOEs) and measures of performance (MOPs) to assess their organizational effectiveness. MOPs evaluate how well an organization executes an action – it does not judge whether the action contributes to long term objectives; MOEs evaluate whether an organization's actions yield progress towards the objectives. For example, the Phoenix Program levied VCI neutralization quotas on the PIOCCS/DIOCCs and used the total numbers of VCI neutralized to determine if the campaign was successful.

There were two problems with such an approach; first, it confused MOPs with MOEs. Numbers of neutralizations that a subordinate element executed might be a valid MOP; i.e. it demonstrated whether or not the organization was actively pursuing VCI personnel. Neutralization numbers confused actions with effectiveness. The objective of the Phoenix Program was to limit the VCI's ability to support operations and exercise control over the population. Neutralization numbers did not measure whether Phoenix was effective.[60]

The second problem with the Phoenix quotas was that they caused dysfunctional organizational behavior. Driven to achieve neutralization quotas, police and military units often

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detained innocent civilians in imprecise cordon and sweep operations.[61] The overburdened legal system then took weeks or months to process detainees; the jails and holding areas provided the VC with an excellent environment for recruiting and indoctrinating previously apolitical civilians.[62] The quota system bred corruption, as families paid bribes to secure the release of their relatives while others settled personal scores by identifying their personal enemies as VCI.[63]

While reforms eventually corrected many of the deficiencies in the Phoenix Program, the lesson for current counterinsurgency operations is clear. Metrics designed to measure organizational effectiveness and performance can significantly influence the conduct of operations, both positively and negatively. It is critical to establish MOEs tied to operational objectives. Simple attritional numbers, while easily produced, more often than not are meaningless. For example, neutralizing 75% of Al Qaeda's leadership seems to indicate effective operations. However, without considering issues such as replacements, criticality of losses, or minimum required personnel levels to direct operations, one cannot truly assess the effect of operations. Useful MOEs require a significant understanding of the enemy, the capability to collect detailed feedback on effects, and a major analytical effort. Consequently, the tendency may be to fall back on more easily collected, attrition-focused statistics. The experience of the Phoenix Program suggests that it may be better not to use metrics at all, rather than to use inappropriate ones.

OPERATIONS

Combined Operations

Analysis of the Phoenix Program suggests that infrastructure attack operations are best done in a combined manner, with U.S. military and civilian organizations in a support or advisory role to host nation counterparts. In order to achieve its aim of a 'rifle shot,' Phoenix operations more closely resembled police operations than military ones.[64] Such focused operations require a level of cultural understanding and local area knowledge that only a native can achieve. Attempts to operate unilaterally, without such expertise, can result in indiscriminate use of force and firepower, lost opportunities and a disenchanted, anti-American civilian population.

Combined operations, but with clear American primacy, can send the message that indigenous organizations are inept or incapable. In the battle for legitimacy, it is critical that the regime not only is effective, but that the populace believes it to be effective. Overt U.S.

presence often provides the insurgent with ammunition for his information campaign; insurgent groups in Iraq have leveraged charges of neo-colonialism against the United States to good effect in order to rally nationalists to their cause. The less a regime appears to have surrendered control of basic governmental functions, the better it can deflect the insurgent's propaganda messages and gain or retain the allegiance of the populace.

The Vietnam experience demonstrates that there is significant incentive to minimize combined operations with indigenous forces. The VC infiltrated the South Vietnamese government and security apparatus at every level, which decreased operational effectiveness.[65] This, coupled with the belief that U.S. forces were more capable than the host nation forces, resulted in an American tendency to marginalize South Vietnamese operational participation and inhibited a wider dissemination of intelligence, even between U.S. organizations.[66]

Americans must avoid the temptation to do everything themselves; unilateralism or operational primacy hinders operational effectiveness by inhibiting development of indigenous counterinsurgency expertise and undermining the legitimacy of the host nation regime. It also requires a greater commitment of limited U.S. resources, particularly personnel. U.S. military and civilian security organizations must establish and use common procedural safeguards, such as standards for vetting of indigenous personnel, to ensure operational security, while not incentivizing unilateral operations.[67]

Advisors

The competence of Americans advising the South Vietnamese organizations tasked with executing the Phoenix Program was a significant limiting factor. Phoenix advisors were often young, inexperienced, and lacked appropriate skills, which prevented Phoenix from reaching its full potential. [68] As the program matured, the U.S. instituted training programs and improved personnel selection policies to increase the quality and experience level of advisors. [69] Unfortunately, valuable time was lost before the implementation of changes and the problem remained largely unresolved; however, Phoenix provides some key lessons for advisor operations.

Advisors must possess a basic level of regional expertise and language capability that they further develop once deployed. Advisors who understand their environment can assess the impact of operational techniques on the population, avoid providing the insurgent with ammunition for his propaganda campaign, and design operations that will both target the insurgent infrastructure and enhance the regime's reputation. A language capable advisor can verify the accuracy of translators and host nation intelligence products, and judge the

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effectiveness and trustworthiness of foreign counterparts. When the population fears the host nation security forces due to corruption or insurgent infiltration, they may provide information directly to an advisor who speaks their language.[70]

Advisors operate under vague and uncertain circumstances, within broad procedural guidance. They must be intellectually and professionally comfortable with applying police-like methods instead of military ones. Towards the end of Phoenix, senior leaders recognized that not all military personnel met these requirements; MACV allowed Phoenix advisors to transfer if they found the "…operations repugnant to them personally…".[71]

The special operations community and the CIA's paramilitary organization are primary repositories of personnel with the requisite advisory skills.   While CIA operatives are generally more familiar with the interagency environment, the CIA lacks personnel for a global counterinsurgency advisory effort. Additionally, advisory teams should include expertise from law enforcement agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Regardless of their background, the U.S. should establish a specific advisor training program focused on infrastructure attack methods.

LEGAL/MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

Legal and moral issues are of paramount concern in a counterinsurgency. These issues have the potential to wield considerable influence on the population's perception of legitimacy. Operations must stand the long-term scrutiny of world and U.S. popular opinion. Negative perceptions of Phoenix drew intensive scrutiny from Congress and the media and weakened the legitimacy of the governments of the U.S. and South Vietnam. South Vietnam's inability to house, process, and adjudicate the large numbers of detainees the Phoenix Program generated dramatically hampered its overall effectiveness.[72] In many cases, the system became a revolving door, with hard-core VCI released prematurely. In other cases, lengthy detainment of innocents abetted the enemy's recruitment effort.[73] Detainee interrogations provided the best source of targeting information; however, accusations of inhumane treatment weakened the regime's legitimacy.

Captured insurgents must be dealt with by a fair, responsive, and firm system. The U.S. can directly influence this issue with insurgents captured under its jurisdiction; it can indirectly influence the issue with governments to which it provides aid and advice. To retain legitimacy, America must maintain moral ascendancy. For example, while indefinite incarceration of Al Qaeda detainees in Guantanamo may be legal, it may not be in the long-term best interest of the counterinsurgency. It has negatively impacted relations with coalition partners and

contributed to a negative image of America.[74] To minimize its exposure to criticism, the U.S.
has used agreements that return captives to their nation of origin for disposition, while still
allowing U.S. intelligence agencies access for interrogation purposes ('rendition').[75] This
procedure invites accusations that the United States is using surrogates to do its "dirty" work. In
the long term, the United States must establish a process, in cooperation with its coalition
partners, which yields intelligence for future operations, prevents detainees from rejoining the
insurgency, meets basic legal and ethical standards, and maintains U.S. legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-six years after the fall of Saigon signaled the ultimate failure of counterinsurgency
in South Vietnam, the 11 September 2001 attacks thrust the U.S. into a counterinsurgency
against militant Islamic fundamentalism – an effort requiring operations on a broader scale, with
significantly higher stakes. The communist insurgency in South Vietnam attacked a government
of only symbolic importance to the United States. The current militant Islamic insurgency
directly threatens vital U.S. national interests - potentially the most vital of its interests, national
survival. The United States must recognize and identify this threat in order to defeat it.   Words
matter; when the National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism identifies a technique,
terrorism, as the enemy, it can only lead to strategic and operational confusion.[76]

After acknowledging this threat, the U.S. must plan and conduct a holistic
counterinsurgency campaign. This paper focused on only one component of
counterinsurgency, neutralization of the insurgency's infrastructure. This component is critical -
the longer the U.S. delays effective infrastructure attacks, the more difficult they will become, as
militant Islamic movements further develop their clandestine infrastructure. Infrastructure
attacks are only one line of operation in a counterinsurgency strategy. The U.S. and its coalition
partners must also protect populations from the insurgent's coercive methods, pursue social and
economic development to eliminate root causes, and mobilize populations to support the
counterinsurgency. Each of these lines of operation can succeed, yet the overall
counterinsurgency can fail without an information campaign that both supports them and
capitalizes on their success. The battleground of an insurgency lies in the minds of the
populace. The U.S. can only defeat the militant Islamic insurgency when it convinces the
overwhelming majority of the people in the Muslim world that free, representative, and open

societies that export goods and services instead of violence and terror best serve their interests – and that America stands ready to help them develop such societies. In its counterinsurgency campaign, America must maintain moral ascendancy over its opponents and never lose sight of its democratic principles.

WORD COUNT = 5997

[1] William Colby and James McCargar. Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989) 9.

[2] Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1990) xiii, asserts that is the best documented conflict in history, if one judges by sheer volume.

[3] Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997) 6, provides a succinct discussion of the U.S. interests weighed by the Johnson Administration in their decision intercede in the Vietnam conflict.

[4] Arlington National Cemetery Website, "A. Peter Dewey, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Army," available from <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/apdewey.htm>; Internet; accessed 17 November 2004, cites that an approximately 128-man MAAG began supervising equipment transfer to the French in Vietnam on 17 September 1950. Two US airmen on contract to the CIA were KIA over Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The first US advisors arrived in Vietnam 12 February 1955.

[5] Ibid, identifies LTC A. Peter Dewey, US Army, Office of Strategic Services, as the first American killed in Vietnam. LTC Dewey was killed in action by the Communist Vietminh forces on 26 September 1945 near Hanoi. The Defense Department has set 1 November 1955, the date the MAAG was officially established, as the earliest qualifying date for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Air Force Tech Sgt. Richard B. Fitzgibbon, Jr., who was murdered in Vietnam by a fellow airman on June 8, 1956, is considered the first American officially to die in the Vietnam War under these criteria.

[6] Colby, 180; Moyar, 6; and "Named Campaigns – Vietnam," U.S. Army Center for Military History, available from <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/reference/vncmp.htm>; Internet; accessed 17 November 2004; hereafter cited as "Named Campaigns."

[7] "Named Campaigns." By 30 June 1967, total U.S. forces in SVN had risen to 448,800.

[8] Andrade, 53.

[9] Colby, 205.

[10] Moyar, 48, discusses the brief-lived Office of Civil Operations and subsequent decision to establish the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) .

[11] U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Phung Hoang (Phoenix) Program, 1969 End of Year Report,* 28 February 1970; from the Vietnam Collection of the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1. Hereafter referred to as *Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report.*

[12] U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. *Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on VC Infrastructure. Directive 381-41*, 9 Jul 1968. w/Change1. From the Vietnam Collection of the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2, identifies "PHOENIX" as the short title for ICEX. Hereafter cited as MACV Directive 381-41. Douglas Valentine, *The*

Phoenix Program (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990) 122, provides a detailed discussion of the program names. He states that according to a Vietnamese myth Phung Hoang was a legendary bird of conjugal love that only appeared peacetime. He goes on to state that the Americans translated this "peaceful" program into the Phoenix, "…an omnipotent, predatory bird that selectively snatches its prey – a symbol of discord rather than harmony."

[13] Central Intelligence Agency, "The Situation in Vietnam: Overview and Outlook," 24 Jan 1969, no. 0550/69, p. A-1. Hereafter cited as "The Situation in Vietnam."

[14] Andrade, 5. Under the terms of the peace agreement, all Viet Minh forces were to withdraw to the northern half of a divided Vietnam.

[15] Ibid, 6.

[16] "The Situation in Vietnam," 7.

[17] MACV Directive 381-41, 2.

[18] See *Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report.* A-4, for the official description of each of these organizations. See Valentine for an in-depth analysis of each organization.

[19] Andrade, 12-13, 57.

[20] William L. Knapp, Phoenix/ Phung Hoang and the Future: A Critical Analysis of the US/GVN Program to Neutralize the Viet Cong Infrastructure, Student paper (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, March, 1971), 45.

[21] Valentine, 177, notes that "…Tet proved to the world that the VCI shadow government not only existed, but was capable of mobilizing masses of people. …Tet revealed…the intrinsically political nature of the Vietnam War. Even if the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments found it impossible to admit that the outlawed VCI was a legitimate political entity, they could not deny that it had, during Tet, dictated the course of events in South Vietnam. And that fact pushed Phoenix into the limelight." See also, Valentine, 180-181.

[22] Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report, 1.

[23] Knapp, 51-52, identifies the 15 different organizations required to participate in the PIOCCs and DIOCCs.

[24] Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report. A-5.

[25] *Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report.* A-8 discusses GVN establishment of operational goals. It defines "neutralization" of VCI as "…VCI who rally or are induced to rally, those who are captured and sentenced and those who are killed in the course of security operations. The desirability of capturing VCI is stressed, for the intelligence and other values they can offer." Note that detainees could not be counted until they were found guilty.

[26] Knapp, 55-56, and Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report, A-4.

[27] Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report. A-7.

[28] MACV Directive 381-41, 7.

[29] MACV Directive 381-41, 7.

[30] Andrade, 100-101, provides an example of a typical firepower intensive sweep. John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 856, argues that the US military never really came to this realization.

[31] MACV Directive 381-41, 3.

[32] Andrade, 153 and Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report. A-8.

[33] U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam *, Military Operations, Phung Hoang Operations. Directive 525-36*, 5 Nov 1971. From the Vietnam Collection of the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1-2. Hereafter cited as MACV Directive 525-6*,* 1-2.

[34] Ibid, 1.

[35] Valentine threads accusations of an assassination program throughout his book. See 311-314 as an example. Many of the accusations of "assassination" was the idea that a "targeted kill" equaled assassination, 319. As Andrade, x, notes, infrastructure attack involved "…shades of warfare that Americans would prefer not to think about. Most of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) were, strictly speaking, civilians." Moyar, 224-232, addresses the issue of Phoenix as an assassination program in great detail and counters many of Valentine's primary sources. See Andrade, 123, in regards to charges of brutality and torture.

[36] Moyar, 55.

[37] See note 35.

[38] Valentine, 126. Moyar, 245-246 has some excellent reports from former VC on Phoenix effectiveness. Also Andrade, 278.

[39] Moyar, 11, highlights a 1967 CIA estimate of the VCI at 80,000 to 150,000 personnel. *Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report*, 9, estimates the total of VCI at 74,000 personnel. Despite Phoenix's increasing effectiveness over time the VC had been given too long to establish themselves nearly unmolested within South Vietnamese society.

[40] See Valentine, 414; Andrade, 268-270, 278, 263-4; and Moyar, 245, on overall effectiveness of the Phoenix program.

[41] Department of the Army, *Special Forces Unconventional Forces Operations (Initial Draft)*, Field Manual 3-05.201, Vol 1. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, November 2001), 1-9. Hereafter referred to as Field Manual 3-05.201.

[42] Ibid, 1-9.

[43]Dr. Larry Cable, "Reinventing The Round Wheel: Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and Peacekeeping Post Cold War", *Journal of Small Wars and Insurgency* 4 (Autumn 1993): 229.

[44]Ibid, 230.

[45] Field Manual 3-05.201, 1-9.

[46] Michael Vlahos, "Terror's Mask: Insurgency Within Islam," Laurel, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University, 2002, 1. See also "Al Qaida Threat Brief: Executive Summary," Decision Support Systems, Inc. Reno, Nevada: Decision Support Systems, Inc., 2001. Available from the internet at http://www.metatempo.com/AlQaidaThreatBrief.PDF, 2.

[47] FM 3-05.201, p 1-7.

[48] Shy, 850.

[49] FM 3-05.201, p 1-7.

[50] Ibid, p 1-8.

[51] For the purposes of this paper, the regime is defined as the coalition of governments working against the militant Islamic insurgency.

[52] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August, 2004), 365-366.

[53] For example, prior to the attack on Fallujah, the Sunni clerical Association of Muslim Scholars declared that resisting the American and Iraqi government forces was a duty and issued a fatwa prohibiting followers from supporting the regime forces in any war. Fadel Al-Badrani, "Insurgents in Iraq Launch Deadly Attacks: Attacks Carried Out Across Central Iraq, Killing Over 30" Reuters, from AOL http://ar.atwola.com/link/93197704/1096675187 Accessed 06 Nov 2004.

[54] "Al-Zarqawi tape criticizes Muslim scholars " AP, Baghdad, Internet, available at <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-11-24-zarqawi-tape_x.htm?csp=34> Accessed 10 Dec 2004.

[55] Nick Wadhams, "Insurgents step up violence," *Harrisburg Patriot*, 4 January 2005, sec A, p. 3 reported that a videotape found in Baghdad shows a former Al-Jazeera manager telling one of Saddam Hussein's sons, Odai, that "Al-Jazeera is your channel." The Qatar-based television station has been the recipient of Al Qaeda's videotaped messages and has consistently served as an outlet for insurgent propaganda.

[56] George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 2003), 1, states that "The enemy is not one person. It is not a single political regime. Certainly it is not a religion. The enemy is terrorism—premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

[57] Moyar, 48; Andrade, 57.

[58] Moyar, 48-49.

[59] Valentine 183, 204,225 , 325, 369-371; Moyar, 340.

[60] Valentine, 274. See also Moyar, 189-193 on the use of neutralization quotas.

[61] Andrade, 96-97.

[62] Ibid, 206.

[63] Valentine, 108, provides examples of U.S. advisors who stated that informants were manipulating the Phoenix Program for personal motives. Valentine, 154, discusses the judicial backlog caused corruption. Andrade, 123 discusses the downside of quotas, 218-222 summarizes the problems and their effects of corruption and an inadequate legal system.

[64] Valentine, 206-7 provides an example of a typical "rifle-shot" operation.

[65] Ibid, 213, 363 provides estimates of the extent of this infiltration.

[66] Ibid, 182-183, 213, 225, 300-301, 354. See also Andrade, 50.

[67] See Moyar, 154-155 reference operational security procedures. See Moyar, 340 for his ideas on how to force intelligence sharing.

[68] Valentine, 225, 353, 364 on advisor problems and solutions. See also Andrade, 138-140, and Knapp, 51.

[69] LTC Leo Kennedy and LTC Marty Anderson, "An Examination of Vietnam War Senior Officer Debriefing Reports," Military Studies Paper (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 12 May 1986), 26-27.

[70] See Valentine, 229, for the difficulties that can arise when the advisor cannot speak the language. See Valentine, 108, for the idea that all counterinsurgent personnel must be intelligence collectors.

[71] MACV Directive 525-36 , 2.

[72] Andrade, 219-222, argues that the inadequacy of the judicial system to meet the workload, lenient sentencing, and a generally inept legal system was the critical weakness of the Phoenix Program. See also Knapp, 56.

[73] Ibid, 206, 221.

[74] Neil A. Lewis, "U.S. sets stricter ban on torture," *Harrisburg Patriot*, 1 January 2005, sec A, p. 9.

[75] Dana Priest, "U.S. seeks long-term solution for detainees," *Harrisburg Patriot*, 3 January 2005 , sec A, p. 3.

[76] George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 2003), 1, states that "The enemy is not one person. It is not a single political regime. Certainly it is not a religion. The enemy is terrorism—premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

GLOSSARY

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CORDS - Civil Operations and Rural Development Support

DIOCC - District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

GVN – Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

ICEX - Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on VC Infrastructure (VCI)

MACV - Military Assistance Command Vietnam

MI^2 - Militant Islamic Infrastructure

MOE – Measure of Effectiveness

MOP – Measure of Performance

NVA – North Vietnamese Army

PIC - Province Interrogation Center

PIOCC - Province Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center

PRU - Provincial Reconnaissance Unit

VBI - Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation; Cong An in Vietnamese

VCI - Viet Cong Infrastructure

WOT - War on Terror

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